

Illinois lawmakers say closing U.S. House was prudent measure October 19th, 2001

The Associated Press State & Local Wire

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BODY:

Shutting down the U.S. House of Representatives after an anthrax scare was the right thing to do, several members of Illinois' congressional delegation said Thursday.

"I think everybody needs to take a deep breath and calm down," said U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Evanston. "That may apply to the Congress, but certainly I don't think anyone would want us to do nothing. I think what we did was reasonable. "We're going to take time to take the precautions and then move on."

She said the House finished its business in an orderly fashion before members left, adding, "There was no panic, nobody ran away."

Most of Illinois' representatives returned home a day earlier than expected after their offices and the House were closed when more than 30 congressional workers tested positive for exposure to the anthrax bacterium. Congressional offices were expected to be swept for anthrax.

"We're not doing anything different than we would expect any entity to do, and that is to identify the anthrax, identify where it's at, clean it up and then go back to work," said U.S. Rep. John Shimkus, R-Collinsville.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, said the House didn't shut its doors simply to protect its members, but to protect the health of the public that visits congressional buildings and young staffers who work for Congress.

"Congress is full of 21- and 22-year-old young men and women who have come to work for the Congress. They're the ones on the front line who open the mail," he said. "I have to look into the eyes of the parents of these kids who work for me and make sure I've done everything possible to protect their lives."

Many members said they had planned to return to their districts for the weekend anyway. Some who arrived home early attended events such as ribbon cuttings and luncheons that they otherwise would have missed.

"If you're from Illinois, you always look to come back," said U.S. Rep. Danny Davis, D-Chicago. "When the bell sounds, if you're from Chicago, you beat a path to the airport because there's so much going on in the city all the time."

Some members stuck with their original plan to return to their districts on the weekend, including U.S. Rep. Lane Evans, D-Rock Island, who will be back in Illinois on Saturday morning.

Meanwhile, the Senate remained open on Thursday although its offices were closed.

Democratic Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin cast some votes during a Senate Judiciary Committee meeting, including one to approve the nomination of Patrick Fitzgerald as the U.S. attorney for the northern district of Illinois. Durbin's regular office was closed for the day while congressional offices were checked for anthrax.

"Everything's been pretty normal, except I'm working out of a kind of broom closet office that I'm lucky enough to have here in the Capitol," he said. "It's about 5 foot by 8 foot but it has a computer and telephones and all you need, so business continues."